Geographies of Missing Adults

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GEOGRAPHIES OF MISSING ADULTS

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GEOGRAPHIES OF MISSING ADULTS

Introduction

'Every case is different [...] routine kills. I demand from my people that they look at every case from scratch as if they know nothing and it's from looking at a case from that way that you will see some details. Some specific elements that make a case unique. [...] Never exclude anything [...] everything is possible', Alain Remue, Head of the Belgium Federal Police's Missing Person's Unit (17 May 2013).

Alain Remue, in a recent address to a European meeting of researchers on missing people, reminds us of the need to regard each missing person episode as a unique single event. Understanding the way in which people interact with the environments around them is an integral part of comprehending the behaviour of missing people and their unique journeys, and as such is the focus of this chapter. Whenever a person is reported missing to the police, there is an obvious need to locate an individual in space and time. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) provide a definition of 'missing' equating to "… anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established …", and a definition of 'absent' as "a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be" (ACPO 2013: 5) clearly indicating that when someone is reported as missing to the police, it is because their geographical location at that moment in time is unknown or uncertain. To complicate matters, the individual may not be static in their situation or behaviour, and may move over time, through space, navigating the environment on an evolving journey, which could also be considered uncertain in terms of its intentionality (Stevenson et al. 2013). Consequently, searching for a missing person can be a complicated process for any agency, involving interpreting the interplay of spatial, environmental and human elements at stake. In this chapter, we elaborate these complexities, and seek to use recent research evidence to shed new light on missing adult

geographies and journeys.

In the first section we review the research evidence that exists around where people reported as missing travel to and discuss the associated development of quantitative spatial profiling used in the search for them. In discussing these developments, we consider the categorical knowledges emergent from large scale empirical data sets of missing persons enquiries that seek to unify experience and direct search tactics, against and alongside the more 'specific' and 'particular' detail of lived missing experience that qualitative data produce (Edkins 2011, Stevenson et al. 2013). By using the latter, we seek to provide new ways of understanding missing journeys from the inside, and across different adults' narrated experience. We do this specifically through the use of qualitative data generated as part of the Economic and Social Research Council funded research project '*Geographies of Missing People*: *processes, experiences, responses*'[1]. This project provides insights into the social and spatial dimensions of adult missing journeys with an emphasis on decision making, planning, mobility choices, environmental resourcefulness and return. The material contributes to the evidence-base around adult missing persons (a field where research is still in its infancy) and provides insights for policing education and operations (see Stevenson et al. 2013).

What do we know about geographies of missing adults from existing research?

While there is a slowly increasing body of literature on missing persons only a very small amount of research to date has considered missing adults (Hirschel and Lab 1988, Henderson and Henderson 1998, Biehal et al. 2003, Tarling and Burrows 2004, Stevenson et al. 2013). One of the original and largest studies, which explored missing persons experience using case records held by

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Missing People (then the National Missing Persons Helpline), and a survey of 114 former missing people, presents a typology of missing experience making a clear distinction between intentional and unintentional absences, understood on a continuum (Biehal et al. 2003). Importantly, this research suggested an adult's intentions or motivations will affect how they travel, where they go and what they do. For example, a person who intentionally removes themselves from a situation (eg. a woman leaving home to avoid a situation of domestic abuse) is likely to engage in a very different journey and behaviour than someone who is unintentionally missing (eg. an elderly male who becomes lost due to cognitive impairments associated with dementia).

One of the key geographical anchor points relevant to the search for any missing person is their place of residence. This usually represents the beginning of their journey and may contain crucial clues about their disappearance, such as a suicide note, or the absence or presence of key objects like bank cards or a passport (ACPO 2013). It appears, however, that people are not always reported missing from their home address. A study by Tarling and Burrows (2004), based on 1000 cases of both adult and child missing gathered from the Metropolitan Police in London, found that just under half of the people had been reported missing from their home address, a quarter from hospitals and the remaining were split equally between being reported missing from a care environment or other location (eg. work). Echoing this work, Shalev et al. (2009) also found that just under half were reported missing from home and the remaining were reported from a variety of locations including; work, institutions, public places, and friends and relatives addresses (and see Stevenson et al. 2013). This highlights the potentially complex relationship between different geographical anchor points (eg. work and home) and the missing person's intentional or unintentional journey as well as the perceptions of those left behind who report the person missing (see Parr et al. forthcoming).

In terms of missing journeys, very little is known about where people go or stay while they are away. The only published study to touch on this reports a diversity of experiences, finding that sixty percent stayed in one place while away and just nine percent moved more than once (these more often slept in temporary accommodation / shelters and moving more or less did not appear to be related to time away) (Biehal 2003). Additionally, sleeping rough was engaged in by more than a quarter of the sample and over a third felt themselves to be in danger at some point while they were missing. However, this work was based on charity recorded data and included people who had lost contact with friends and family rather than exclusively those who had been reported missing to the police. So the extent to which it can be generalised to missing persons falling within new police definitions is unknown (ACPO 2013).

In terms of return and the end points to missing episodes, some research has begun to throw light on this issue with studies of police recorded data suggesting that approximately fifty percent of missing adults return to their home address of their own accord (Henderson and Henderson 1998, Tarling and Burrows 2004, Hirschel and Lab 1988) and approximately ten percent are found in the street or an open public place (Tarling and Burrows 2004). Furthermore, Tarling and Burrows (2004) found that over three-quarters were resolved within 48 hours of being reported missing. Of course, where a person is found and the timescales in which they are found may be a function of the search efforts and strategies used to locate them. While these initial studies have attempted to explore some of the issues which may be relevant to an understanding of the geographies of missing persons, they only 'skim the surface' providing little in the way of in-depth understanding of this important area or direct guidance to support agency responses to missing people.

Spatial profiling in search and rescue

A body of research which predates much of the research specifically on missing persons but has relevance to the geographies of missing adults relates to the behaviour of ‘lost persons’. In terms of search planning, a more scientific approach to search management was initially developed in America by national park rangers and mountain rescue personnel who were responsible for ‘lost person’ searches in the many large National Parks throughout the US and Canada (eg. Syrotuck 1975, 1976, Hill 1991, 1999). Consequently, this work was based on those who had become disorientated and had a desire to be found, or persons who were simply overdue in their return from an outing or activity in which they were involved (i.e., unintentionally absent). By collating and analysing search and rescue statistics accumulated by civilian search and rescue teams they found they could separate lost persons into different behavioural categories and predict the distances these people would travel from the point they were last seen or went missing from, to where they were found (eg. Syrotuck 1975, 1976, Hill 1991). Subsequent similar research has been conducted in many other countries including Australia (Twardy et al. 2006) and the UK (Perkins et al. 2011) and has incorporated wider categories of lost and missing persons such as missing dementia patients (Koester and Stooksbury 1992, Koester 1998). This work has illustrated the importance of spatial profiling in helping to define search areas and as a result of this work, a number of composite guides have been published to aid search planning and management (eg. Koester 2008). Of course, not all missing persons are lost, and not all are in very rural environments, so while this data has proven useful in more extreme or particularly rural locations, its application to the full range of more urban or 'everyday' missing persons, particularly those encountered by the police, has limitations.

Developing quantitative spatial profiling for missing persons reported to the police

Building on the theory of spatial profiling in wilderness environments, research conducted by Grampian Police presented the first attempt to provide normative spatial profiles to specifically aid police missing person investigations (ACPO 2006, Gibb and Woolnough 2007). Based on a UK wide analysis of 2,198 closed police recorded missing person cases, Gibb and Woolnough (2007) used 'predictive' variables (eg. age, sex, suicide attempts, previous missing episodes, and mental condition) to 'predict' outcome characteristics' (eg. distance travelled, where they will be located, and timescales in which they will be traced/found) presenting geographical and temporal profiles associated with these. This work is currently used by police and search and rescue agencies throughout the UK (ACPO 2006). Like the wilderness search and rescue work (eg. Syrotuck 1975) this work is based on the premise that missing people behave in similar ways depending on particular elements of their specific circumstances. However, the main drawback of the research is that cases were gathered from police forces in a quasi-random manner and so the data cannot claim to be representative of all missing persons. Nevertheless, Shalev et al. (2009) also argue for the use of spatial analysis techniques to explore the behaviour of missing persons and its successful application by police suggests that such an approach can help expedite the safe, efficient and cost effective location of missing persons.

Geographies of missing people: qualitative insights

While the development of quantitative spatial profiling appears to have helped the police improve their understanding and response to missing person investigations, there is a paucity of evidence based on missing experiences as articulated by missing adults. Against this backdrop, we attempt to address the gaps by reporting empirical findings from the *Geographies of Missing People* research project mentioned above. Through empirical findings from in-depth interviews with adults' reported as missing during 2009 – 2011, we fill in gaps on what is known about missing

journeys from insider perspectives.

Adults reported as missing were selected based on their age (18 years and over), police force areas and time away. Working with two police force databases (Police Scotland and The Metropolitan Police Service), potential interviewees were identified and contacted through the police in line with the 1998 Data Protection Act. In addition, post-fourteen day cases were proactively sampled to ensure the opportunity to potentially interview longer-term missing persons. Face-to-face in-depth and semi-structured interviews took place with forty-five adults in a location of their choosing. Interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed using QSRNvivo8 software. Not all the sample self-identified with the ACPO (2013) definition (given above) of a missing person, but did recognize themselves as 'absent'. However, the study has not sought to refine these definitions of missing (ACPO 2013, Payne 1995) nor has it sought to sample adults reported as missing on the basis of particular 'types' of missing experience. Rather, the interviews focussed on the journeys undertaken whilst being reported as missing and reflections on these (see Stevenson et al. 2013, Parr and Stevenson 2013). The remainder of this chapter draws on this qualitative evidence to provide insights into the social and spatial dimensions of adult missing journeys and reports on decision making and choices in relation to planning and leaving, mobility, resourcing and return.

Leaving to go missing

Many people reported as missing are absent for relatively short periods of time (Tarling and Burrows 2004, NPIA 2011, Stevenson et al. 2013) and as a result journeys may appear 'meaningless' beyond the leaving and return (if this occurs). However, this research suggests that even short journeys have profound effects for adults themselves, their families and friends,

and can require huge amount of police resources (see Shalev Greene & Pakes 2012). As previous studies have shown (James et al. 2008) and the latest research evidence reflects (Stevenson et al. 2013), the main drivers adults report that influence their decisions to go absent are: mental health crisis, drug and alcohol issues, relationship breakdowns, and debt. Whilst vital to understanding the 'exceedingly complex web of behaviours and responses that surround the phenomenon of missing persons' (James et al. 2008: 2), it is equally important to understand what happens at the point of leaving and how people affected by the drivers for missing decide *where* to go, *when* and *if* to go, and *when* and *how* to return. Confirming findings from previous studies (Tarling and Burrows 2004, Shalev et al. 2009, NPIA 2011) our research shows that persons reported as missing go from a range of locations, with the most frequently reported location being the home address, followed by psychiatric wards.

Planning	% of adults (n=58)	
	Male	Female
Days before	5%	7%
Night before	7%	16%
Moments before	29%	24%
Mention plan to others	3%	7%
Unclassified	2%	

Column does not total 100% as people planned to go missing more than once

Table 1: Planning window before the act of leaving

In terms of planning, Table one shows how the level of consideration over whether to leave varied amongst the adult interviewees. While for the majority (53%) the decision to leave was instantaneous, twenty-three percent planned to leave the night before and thirteen percent made plans several days in advance. An example of advance planning is illustrated by Darren as he discusses the time leading up to his leaving:

"I didn't speak to anybody except to one of my close mates. I felt very, very guilty and it put me quite emotionally on the edge so I just blanked. I had actually packed a few days before

hand so I had made it as easy for myself as I possibly could. All the tools for my disappearance were there. The flight, the car booked in safely. All the money that I had got for spending money went on a travel card".

Darren's experience and those of other interviewees illustrate planning strategies ranging from: withdrawing money from bank accounts in small quantities to avoid detection from a spouse; changing Sim cards in mobile phones; reserving hotel rooms in advance; arranging to meet friends for companionship and/or shelter; to devising routes out of psychiatric wards, which included plans to use time-out from a ward to abscond. Importantly, planning to leave days in advance was not associated with being missing for longer periods, nor was it associated with choosing exact destinations to go to. However, the findings suggest females were more likely than males to plan in advance to go absent and a minority (7%) of women indicated their intentions to others before or at the point of leaving. Signs were exhibited to service providers and significant others through verbal and behavioural clues related to stress and depression. For example, in three cases interviewees had not turned up for work and did not call in sick, which was unusual for them. Three people had been to see their Doctor showing signs of physical and emotional stresses before going missing and one female interviewee reported that: *'one of my trigger factors is I cut all my hair off and I put bleach in it. That is one of my signs that I'm due to go'*. Furthermore, for those adult interviewees who were suicidal (33%), signalling intent to leave was noted especially for those in psychiatric institutions. Importantly, each person at risk of going missing may have their own personal indicative sign and, while observing trigger points and predicting missing episodes is complex, it could be helpful to families, health agencies and care services to learn to be more attentive to signs of impending 'missingness' which may offer opportunities for intervention and prevention.

Where will I go? Decision making during the missing journey

The importance of obtaining accurate information on distance travelled by adults reported as missing is described by Shalev et al. (2009). Distance travelled is perceived as a valuable factor for building response scenarios and search planning, usually aimed at police specialist search advisors and volunteer search and rescue teams. However, placing too much emphasis on linear relationships of distance and time runs the risk of search being focussed on location of departure and destination, rather than journey experience, mobility and encounters. Indeed, the empirical data below suggests a wider appreciation of missing experience relating to *all* stages of the journey is important. As Parr and Fyfe (2012) remind us, missing adults are a highly mobile and varied 'group' and the complexity of the *journey making* experience (see Crang 2001) is critical to better understanding.

Despite elements of planning described above, nearly all adults reported that their missing journey was not pre-determined in terms of how long it would last or the exact location they would end up. Rather, the first few hours of a journey were spent focused on decisions on *where* to go and *how* to travel, suggesting a kind of '*crisis mobility'* (Parr and Fyfe 2012: 9).

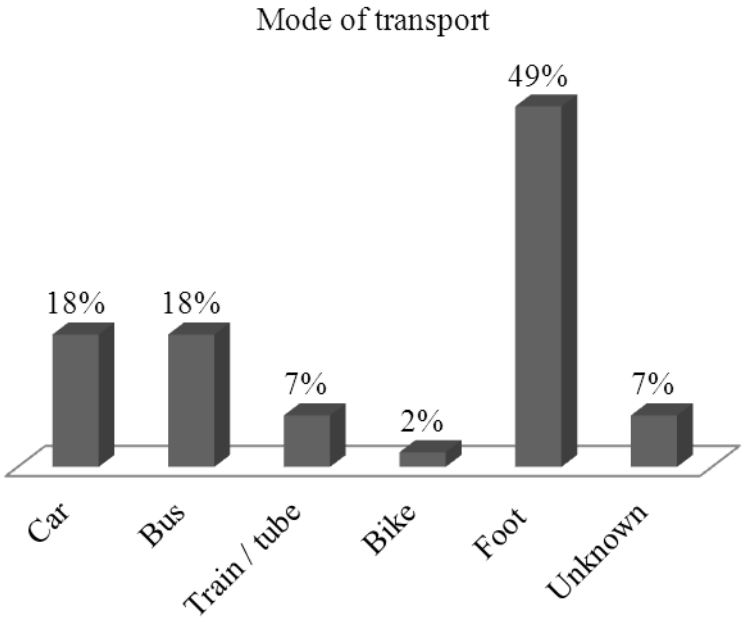

Figure 1: Planning window before the act of leaving

Figure one shows that equal use was made of buses (18%) and cars (18%) as a mode of transport. Importantly, participants stated that using public transport meant the scheduling of journeys was largely outside their control and waiting at bus stops added to the anxiety of being caught. An awareness of the ability of CCTV or other systems, such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition or Oyster Card technology, to track movements in time and space also influenced decisions around mode of travel and movement through environments, as explained by Max when he discusses why he doesn't use a car or Oyster Card:

'I drive, but straight away it has to be registered and especially nowadays and the police know straight away through their computers. So to get a car and be anonymous is very, very hard and [to have an Oyster Card], you know, I don't have anything that can be traced back to me'.

The salience of Max's account in relation to the linkages between mobility choices and

technological tracking partially accounts for why walking is the majority mode of mobility for the interviewees. Many recognised the advantages that walking offered as they could move with less fear of observation and choose their own routes: *'I decided to walk up the High Street and then I joined some back streets and they were quiet. I was able to walk along there for a bit and avoid the crowds'* (John). As Middleton (2009) suggests, walking opens up the possibility of doing other things in a way that other forms of urban transport do not. For John, choosing back streets and less crowded routes enabled him to perceive his journey as undetected. John's narrative, further reflects the points made by Solnit (2001: 5), who asserts, "walking leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts" and is "an observer's state, cool, withdrawn, with senses sharpened, a good state for anybody who needs to reflect or create" (186). Walking, then, for those reported as missing, allows more than mere transportation and avoidance of surveillance technology, and as Rhianna and Amanda describe, it is both a psychically and therapeutically important response to help deal with the thoughts and emotions experienced during these crisis mobilities (see also Parr 1999).

> *'[The] actual physical sensation of walking meant I felt free and I felt getting all the blood pumping back to my heart. And that type of walking, where you don't really know where you're going, it's liberating'* (Rhianna).

> *'It was about 2 o'clock in the morning and I was just walking. I was just wandering the streets, just having this need to keep going forward, but at the same time not having any clue as to where I was going to end up'* (Amanda).

Confusion is a commonly reported state-of-mind on missing journeys and rather than moving from point A to point B in linear ways, journeys were often characterised by wandering in circles, loops

or squares. This is not to suggest a presence of aimlessness, but rather is a reflection on deliberate decisions about *where* to walk and the *geographies of walk* taken. For forty-six percent of interviewees staying local and going to familiar or significant places was important. Many specifically steered clear of their home street and neighbouring streets in the areas they lived for fear that they would be detected. So, going to familiar places and staying local was recognised as a risky strategy as it could lead to being seen. But the risk was balanced by the recognition that: "*If I had gone somewhere I didn't know it would have been a lot harder to get through the next few days because I wouldn't know where anything was"* (Mathew). Knowing streets, as Mathew's quote shows, and being able to navigate areas comfortably, allowed interviewees to blend in and not appear out of place or lost. In fact, to be lost was perceived as a significantly different experience to being missing. Choosing *where* to go, then, is often a conscious deliberative process, as well as an act of memory and crisis.

Environments as resources

Johnsen et al. (2008: 197) found that the common everyday needs of homeless people were 'subsistence, ablutions, socialising and sustaining themselves financially', which are, they suggest, in many ways no different to those of housed people. The narratives in this research concur with such understandings as interviewees described the myriad of ways they used the built and natural environment on their missing journeys to meet these needs. In trying to do so, however, this temporarily mobile group did not readily identify with nor have knowledge of homeless service provision and support networks on the streets, and this, coupled with their need to hide throughout their journeys, made for stressful experiences. Even if adults might not be aware that they have formally been reported as missing, they were attentive to resources that could facilitate their perceived need to hide. Hiding behaviours which utilised environmental resources ranged from:

taking shelter to avoid detection, changing their physical appearance, going by a false name, avoiding CCTV, changing their clothing by stealing new clothes off washing lines or from charity bins, or staying with friends who won't disclose their whereabouts. In the following interview extract, Amanda reflects upon the ways she employed hiding behaviours:

'I got worried every time I heard a car because not many cars and so, I would duck into someone's garden quickly and come out again' (Amanda).

As Amanda explains, she understands the potentiality for discovery and uses tactics to lower the chances of being seen. She draws attention to how missing people are attuned to surveillance and how they use the built and natural environment as resources to avoid this. Importantly, as Table two shows, males and females used both the built and natural environment to hide with minimal differences between them.

Hiding behaviours	% of adults (n=39)	
	Males	Females
Changed physical appearance		5%
Changed clothes	5%	8%
Wore dark or clothing to conceal face	8%	5%
False name	10%	3%
Hid in natural environment other places (including parks, woods)	18%	10%
Hid in built environment (including friends, sheds and derelict buildings)	13%	16%

Column does not total 100% as adults may have been involved in more than one type of hiding practice or none at all.

Table two: Hiding behaviours

Wooded areas, shady parks and derelict buildings were deliberately chosen and small and large parks in (semi)-residential areas featured in forty-six percent of missing journeys as popular resting places: *'There's like a park. I remember sitting on a bench for ages watching basically drunks walk past and the cops were on the go and, the trees sort of shaded and nobody noticed*

you' (Trish). As journeys continued in the constant cycle of motion and emotion, places to rest both momentarily and for longer periods of time increased in importance. Transport hubs, such as bus and train stations, as well as airports, offered opportunities for adults to rest, eat, wash and sleep masked by the rhythms of these spaces. This is clearly indicated by Daniel as he reflects on visiting and staying overnight at an airport, saying: *'lot of people arrive early for flights they've got to catch early in the morning and they stay over at the airport so you don't really stick out'*. Although such places offer access to facilities, there was recognition that transport hubs didn't provide cover indefinitely as they are heavily policed and surveyed environments. Still, many were drawn to these places, not only for restorative practices, but because they acted as symbolic spaces providing a series of possibilities for travel, an associated sense of hopefulness and even *feelings of happiness* in some cases. This suggests that being immersed in sites for 'legitimate' mobility is helpful for some people as they go absent. On this basis, such places could be targeted sites of education and intervention around the issue of missing persons.

Return

Previous research found that the majority of missing persons incidents are resolved quickly (Tarling and Burrows 2004, NPIA 2011) which is broadly consistent with the findings of this latest work where the majority (54%) of adults returned or were located within forty-eight hours, and twenty-four percent were missing between forty-eight hours and seven days (Stevenson et al. 2013). Importantly, all the interviewees in the *geographies of missing people* study returned or where traced and in discussing considerations for return, memories of this are of a transition filled with practical considerations and emotions of guilt, uncertainty, fear, and relief amongst others. These were often caused by uncertainly in *how* to return, as two interviewees, Amanda and Max, suggest:

'I wasn't sure if I was in trouble with the police or not. I didn't know and I thought if they found me I would get arrested. You don't know what procedures are' (Amanda).

'When you get to that situation and you are about to go back, your mind is thinking about "what am I going to go back to face". It's just like the whole situation and you get a cramp in your stomach. It makes you feel anxious' (Max).

There are multiple drivers for return and mechanisms for being reconnected, from being located by the police, friends or family, to 'running out of steam' or feeling the need to reengage with regular routines. Uncertainty about what going missing *means* in terms of police procedure, as well as wondering what family responses would be, loom large in anxieties about return. Ninety three percent of interviewees reported police involvement in their journeys and showed varied experiences of return and police interaction ranging from Wilma, commenting *'the police are the soundest. They're the ones that are least judging'*, to Angela revealing how police interaction was embarrassing and induced feelings of being a 'criminal'. In cases where missing adults felt like a criminal they were provided with limited opportunities to discuss the geographies of their missing journeys despite many having the personal need to do so. This also leads to lost opportunities for data capture and 'informed' policing (cf. Shalev et al. 2009, Parr and Fyfe 2012). The research evidence suggests that what officers *say* and *explain* about being a missing person is very important in helping people cope not just at the time of return, but for years after the event. Key messages, such as "it's our job. It's what we are here for, we're just glad that you're safe now" were critical to generating a positive police-adult experience. This suggests there are further opportunities for police and partner-agency policy development and training that focus on *where*, *when* and *how* to conduct 'return' interviews that take place after someone is located.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed the research evidence that exists around missing person's geographies and introduced new empirical data in an attempt to expand the limited evidence-base in this field. We have argued for the importance of including people's narrated experience of being missing in relation to informing future policing practice. We also assert that qualitative evidence helps to 'people' missing persons enquiries and exists as a complement to the more categorical knowledges that are produced as a result of working with large data sets related to spatial behaviour profiles. Returning to the words of Alain Remue, who reminds us that every missing person case is different and unique, we argue that it is important to be attentive to personal characteristics and specific geographical preferences, such as those discussed above, as these provide insights into the planning, mobility choices, resourcing and return that characterise missing journeys. Although most people who are reported as missing return within a relatively short space of time, this does not mean their journeys are without meaning or consequence. We are better equipped to intervene and assist people at risk of going missing if we regard them as *active agents* - agents who hold knowledge about the *geographies* of their journey – as well as relational actors – who need to make sense of their 'crisis mobility' after the event. People who are reported as missing are a rich source of information and taking time to talk and listen to them on return in an empathic manner is both beneficial for their recovery and reconnection, but may also have the potential to enrich future investigations that may lead to increased successful outcomes.

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